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AUTHOR Raban, Bridie
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ABSTRACT

One of the tasks for the British National Curriculum Council has been to identify steps toward proficiency in the English language and, on that basis, issue descriptions of appropriate progress for students at each level and stage. There is a danger that teachers may view these steps as a linear sequence of accomplishments, each to be achieved in turn. Rather, language learning needs to be seen as recursive. Young writers are learning to make their texts explicit to a reader by using, for example, linguistic connectives which give a sense of coherence to the writing. In an analysis of speech and writing samples from five year olds, a greater variety of connectives was found in speech than in writing. However, six year olds in the same study displayed the reverse finding. It was also found that they demonstrated a greater syntactic range when writing was purposeful. Writing samples taken from seven and eight year olds at a suburban primary school in England illustrate a number of different ways in which developing writers take account of a reader. Much of what these young writers are doing in their writing represents embryonic forms of what can be found in the writing of mature authors. The youngsters know how to provide context for their stories, how to build tension and excitement, and how to keep the attention of a reader. They also manipulate devices which make it known that they are aware of the reader and handle changes of time and parallel sequences. Teacher intervention will support these young writers best if it is informed by a deeper understanding of what young writers can do. (MG)

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Writing for a Reader:
displays of a developing sense of audience in 7 - 8 year old writers.

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Dr Bridie Raban
Dept of Arts and Humanities in Education
University of Reading
London Road, Reading
RG1 5AQ England.

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The arrival of a national curriculum in England and Wales brings with it levels of assessment for key age groups in the school population. Children at 7, 11, 14 and 16 years will be assessed for their progress through ten levels in different school subjects. English is a core foundation subject along with science and mathematics, and has provided a context for wide ranging discussions both within the profession and between educators and government administrators. One of the tasks for the National Curriculum Council has been to identify steps towards proficiency in English language and, therefore, identify what would constitute apprpriate descriptions of progress at each level and stage. This task has been made more difficult by the climate, emanating from government, which declares that pupils in schools should be taught grammar, taught to speak correctly, along with the exhortations to have pupils learn spelling and handwriting.

These objectives are disturbing when stated in these terms and much time and attention has been paid to the descriptions of language learning and developmental targets to be obtained by all children progressively (NCC, 1989). When such a programme is set out in any degree of detail, however, there is a danger that teachers may view language learning as a linear sequence of accomplishments, each to be achieved in turn before progress can be made. In order to avoid this, the Kingman Committee (DES, 1988),

reporting and making recommendations to the government on the teaching of English Language, while rejecting the explicit teaching of grammar, emphasised the salience of audience, purpose and context for all language learning and assessment activities.

Alongside this laudible proviso, language learning needs to be seen as recursive. This implies that through active use language is extended, enriched and restructured, and these progressions are the basis of what we call development. As children experience language through social and intellectual interactions they become more able to marshal their linguistic resources towards increasing levels of sophistication.

While talk is transitory and can be difficult to capture without tape-recordings and transcriptions, writing leaves a trace which gives opportunities for reflection. Student teachers, in particular, find it more difficult to assess skills and abilities in children's talk and one way in which they can be helped to acknowledge the wealth of language learning that children accomplish by reflecting on what they write.

The main aim of writers is to produce comprehensible texts and this is done by using the same cueing systems that make texts readable - semantic,

syntactic and graphophonic. Moreover, for a reader to understand a text it needs to be complete and coherent. Writers need to learn not to make assumptions about knowledge and experience in their readers. They depend on the reader to make inferences and predictions, but this is only possible if their writing has provided sufficient information. It is for this reason that known audiences are essential for young writers. Too frequently they perceive their teacher as knowing everything and if their teacher is their only audience this may hinder their developing skill in taking account of a reader. Goodman et al (1987) summarise this aspect of language development:

> The process of writing must result in text that is comprehensible for the intended readers. That requires that it be relatively complete, that ideas be well presented, that appropriate forms, styles and conventions be used.

So clearly young writers have a lot to learn, but this does not mean that there is a hierarchy of skills and abilities. Development is not linear in this sense.

At the surface level, much of the skill of taking account of a reader can be exhibited through the use of particular linguistic devices. These young writers are learning to make their texts explicit to a reader by using, for example, linguistic connectives which give a sense of coherence to the writing. McCutchen (1986) refers to these linguistic devices as local connections; 'and', 'or', 'but', 'so', 'when', 'while', 'if' etc. These are words which distinguish

connected discourse from a list of sentences without relation one to another. Such lack of textual coherence is commonly found in the writing of young children.

Frequent listing and use of 'and' in the writing of young school entrants in England (5 years old) has been seen as an example of written down speech, indicating that these beginning writers have yet to develop any sense of a reader for their writing, a reader who has different needs from a listener. This implies that they have yet to learn that the reader needs more information to make sense of text. However, this lack of a sense of audience may well be due to the fact that the known audience, their teacher, is ever present and knows just what they are writing about because they have discussed it together.

In support of this hypothesis, in an analysis of speech and writing samples from the same children at 5 years of age (Raban, 1988), a greater variety of connectives were found in their speech than in their writing. However, 6 year olds, reported in the same study displayed the reverse finding. They used more varied and a larger number of connectives in their writing than in their speech. Therefore, the notion that immature writing emanates from a technique of written down speech is questionable.

One reason for the reverse finding at 6 years of age may be because 5 year olds frequently dictate their pieces, using their teacher as scribe. Scott (1984) has shown that one example of linguistic coherence, that of conjunct use, is dependent on the context of speech, with children using more and a greater variety of conjuncts in peer interactions than in interviews with adults. Therefore, once children become independent writers, they appear able to display a wider range of connectives which gives their writing a sense of coherence.

Peters (1985) also found through comparison of the same children's writing at home and at school, that they demonstrate a greater syntactic range in their purposeful writing - writing which is most frequently found at home. This kind of writing which is urgent and demands action provides the context not only for improvement in handwriting and spelling, but also for extending the child's desire to make the text coherent. Peters shows two pieces of writing from the same child to illustrate this contrast, a letter to the 'teeth angels' left under the child's pillow and a piece written around the same time in school:

1. Dear teeth Angels I lost my tooth under the seat of my car please can you find for me and give me the money

2. I went to norfolk.
I went to the beach.
I went to the slot machines.
I went fishing.
I went swimming.

These developments in children's writing arise because of their need to make their message understandable. At the other extreme, an example of an incoherent text which fails to identify any relationship between the items of information is shown below. It was written in school after a request made by the teacher to write the morning 'news' and reveals an apparent disregard for audience when it is taken out of context. It does not survive as a piece of writing;

> I made a obstacle I played with my sisters ball I made a hole in my trousers
>
> (David 6 yrs)

The discussion which follows here centres on a sample of writing pieces from a small group of 7 - 8 year olds. They attend a suburban primary school in England which is fortunate in having a stable and committed staff. The school has a reputation for a positive school ethos where children enjoy their lessons, make good progress and look forward to coming to school. The children come from a wide range of family backgrounds although none are severely disadvantaged nor outstandingly privileged. The children are a cross-section from the majority of ordinary children in our schools today.

Writing pieces have been selected which illustrate a number of different ways in which developing writers take account of a reader. Attention will be focussed on how these children take their reader through their stories, how they locate the reader in time with their piece, what devices they use to find alternatives to chronological sequences and how they attempt to build up excitement and tension for their reader and in this way enticing them to read on.

An example of William's writing at 7 years of age, like David's piece above, also appears to have little coherence, but the topic of his piece remains the same and this links the different elements;

'One day there lived a boy'

One day livd a boy
the boy had a house
the boy left the gas fir
it was a windy day
the windy was taking the smoke
went to the boy.
the boy started coffee
the boy ran to the house
the boy turned the gas fir of
the boy never people the gas fir
when it is windy.

(William 7 yrs)

Although William's piece lacks textual coherence, this can be said to add to the tension of his story. There is a breathlessness and urgency appropriate to the tale as no words are wasted. His sparse use of punctuation may suggest lines of further work to his teacher, however it is worth mentioning that the one full stop he does use signals a change of direction for the attention of the reader, and as such is used as a powerful device by William. He also uses 'when' appropriately in the last sentence which clearly indicates that he knows how these kinds of words work both syntactically and semantically. Its use here indicates to the reader the point of the story and its conclusion.

A year later, William is beginning to display a range of connectives which add to the surface coherence of his writing;

<u>The big crocodile</u>

Once go on time the lived clokadihe.
The klokadihe love the moon becoks he like it when it dark.
One day a man came in to the woods
The clokadihe saw the man.
The clokadihe ran afaet.
The man stop and the man hite clockadihe and it ran away.

(William 8 yrs)

William has learned from listening to stories how they begin, and here he tries to join two stereotypical story-starting phrases together; "Once upon a time..."

and "A long time ago...". Instead of merely listing events in this piece of writing, William gives us detail about the crocodile and signals his return to the main story using "One day...". The detail he gives about the crocodile loving the moon "because he likes it when it is dark" is definitely an aside for the reader and illustrates a developing sense of audience in his writing. However, this point is lost during the process of subsequent redrafting of this piece.

It is worth bearing in mind that William, a mixed race child, is very reserved in school. He is described by his teacher as a low attainer in class and it is suspected that he experiences bullying outside school. This could be a reason for the constant references to running which appear frequently in William's writing.

Andrew at 7 years of age, in contrast to William, makes frequent use of 'and' and 'then', a more typical hallmark of the early stages of producing connected prose. Andrew is described by his teacher as the least able child in the class and a child who has learned never to make mistakes. Andrew's writing is made up of only those words he feels he can spell with confidence. While taking risks is the sharp point of learning anything at all, even with plenty of teacher support and encouragement, Andrew remained committed to

this strategy. However, on close inspection, it is clear that Andrew has access to quite sophisticated literary devices. In the piece which follows he tells a story which happens in two time scales;

Clown for a day

One day there was a circus in a park.
and a little boy said I can be a actor
and his daddy said whe you get old and they you can be a clown
and whee he got old he would learn more
when he got old he went to the circus
and he would say have you got a joke for me
and they would say said you can me a clown
and he would run home and tell his Father
and the next day he would go to the circus and be a clown
and then he would go home.

(Andrew 7 yrs)

The two time scales Andrew is handling here are the imagined present and the imagined future, although it is not clear how far he is hypothesising or reporting events.

A year later he uses a different device, one which creates tension for the reader, a device often used in stories he would have heard read aloud. He tells the reader something that the characters in the story don't know until the inevitable end;

The Haunted House

Once upon a time there was a big house what was haunted
and there was a big ghousts in the house
and the boys didn't no there was a ghoust in the haunted house...
(Andrew 8 yrs)

The boys go into the house and make hide-outs and other things - all the time building tension, excitement and anticipation for what will happen next;

... but the ghousts and the ghoust got them
the childen got kill
(Andrew 8 yrs)

Trevor, another boy in the same class, finds a different way to connect with his audience. He uses asides in his text which indicate he is aware that someone will be reading his piece;

The Old Trunk

One day it was raning and I had nothing to do.
it was one of those days. you knowe!
Then!
I notised the carpete was loase in one corner.
(Trevor 7 yrs)

Trevor draws the reader into his story by having them identify within a shared experience of rainy days and having nothing to do. In this way he takes the reader with him through the excitement of what happens next.

A year later he still exhibits this ability to collude with his reader by making a comment concerning the action;

The bumbal bee who stung the Butter fly

One day there was a bee. who stung everything.
One such day some one sat on him.
Wich was a great mastak yow!
his bottem was red....

(Trevor 8 yrs)

Most important of all, Trevor exhibits ownership in his writing. He appears comfortable with the process and makes his story-telling his own. He invites his reader to join him in the continuing adventure and uses these asides as a way of telling the reader that he knows they are out there and he wants to share his story with them.

Nancy's writing doesn't exhibit quite the same technique until she is 8 yrs old, although her writing at 7 years clearly indicates her belief that her writing will be read and that it is her responsibility to make what she writes interesting. In order to do this, she uses words like 'suddenly', 'but' and 'so' as well as 'and' and 'then'. More importantly, however, she provides a context for her story;

The FaiRy

I was geting redy for bed when my wobley tothe fell out
I put in my pillow
I went to sleep...

(Nancy 7 yrs)

We all know that this event for children traditionally heralds surprises, surrounded by making wishes and receiving money from the tooth fairy. Nancy recounts these predictable events with some additions of her own;

> Suddenly the room lit up
> and there was a littel fairy with a want
> She said I will give you three wishes.
> I was very surprised
> but then I remembered a hores I liked at the stable
> I said I would like the hores at the stable for my fist wish
> but for my second wish I would like a stable and a field for it.
> then for my third wish I would like to have lots of mony
> so I could give it to the poor peple
> then thous wishis will be granted...
>
> (Nancy 7 yrs)

Nancy is now left with the problem of how these wishes are going to be granted. A slight diversion helps her towards a solution, because she knows that wishes can get granted in all kinds of ways;

> it was on Satday my dad won a card game and got lots of mony
> and got a horse for me and the field with long gras
> and I got lots of mony to give to the poor peple
> I got no mony for my tothe...
>
> (Nancy 7 yrs)

This fact alerts Nancy to the possible poverty of the fairy, for where else can money arrive under pillows except from tooth fairies. She solves this problem too as a way of finishing off her story;

...but the next nite I saw the fairy
and I said that the fairy could have some of my money.

(Nancy 7 yrs)

Nancy is described by her teacher as a clever girl, definitely a reader and a writer. All her writing at this early stage was found to display a sense of audience, not only her stories. Nancy had the support of an involved family among whom many interests besides literacy were shared. She is, therefore, accustomed to the idea that other people will be an audience fir her productions.

At 8 years of age, Nancy's stories show this knowledge of audience quite explicitly. She uses phrases in parenthesis to make comments to her reader and in this way she talks directly to them;

The Stowaway

Once upon a time there was a king who had a beutiful dauhter (called Rosemary)...

(Nancy 8 yrs)

As the story proceeds, Rosemary spends time with her friend Annabell and walks back home from Annabell's on her own;

...meanwile the king thout Rose mary had gone to sleep with Anabell
but when she didnt come home for breakfast
the king phoned Annabells father up
he asked about Rosmary
(but as you know) she wasnt there.
The king nearly fainted.
The princess was in an old hut with rags on and NO jellrey on and
working as a maid.
The king put signs every were
saying that the pricne Who finds Rosemary
can Marrae her
the princes at once set of to find Rosemary
one of the princes went by himself to get her and
(he knew where she was)...

(Nancy 8 yrs)

The ending is predictable and inevitable, and the shape of the story leans heavily on Nancy's knowledge of well-known stories both read and listened to. Her accurate use of 'meanwhile' and 'but' keep the narrative pace and help her to weave into her story aspects of the unfolding tale.

Katherine at age 7 years, like William, does not frequently use explicit linguistic connectives to link aspects of her story. However, the coherence remains obvious because the propositions are topic-focussed. She uses one example at the end of her story and in this provides her reader with much to think about after the tale is told, having just avoided using the stereotypical ending used by many young writers at this age;

One Day I Am On A Ship

One day I am on a ship
the wind is up
I am in the medle of the see
the wind stops
Im stuck in the medle of the see
I put on my marsk and get into the water
there are little fhish in the water
my marsk slepes of
I toos lost it
I start to drawn
I wok up
it was a dream or was it
I found some seeweed on my Night gown.

(Katherine 7 yrs)

Here we find that much of what these young writers are doing in their writing is embryonic forms of what can be found in the writing of mature authors. They know how to provide a context for their stories, they know how to build up tension and excitement in texts and how to keep the attention of a reader, they manipulate devices which let the reader know they know they are there. These children handle changes of time and parallel sequences and even Andrew, described as least able child, lets his reader in on a part of the story not known to the other characters.

Here, then, is evidence of language learners displaying skills of mature language users although their levels of achievement are less sophisticated. However, with support and appropriate teacher intervention they will become

more sophisticated over time and this is the nature of language development. What constitutes appropriate teacher intervention will rest on teachers being aware of what these young writers can do. There is a danger, however, that teachers will remain focussing on surface features of the children's texts and notions of 'correctness' which will be counter-productive. Learning to make meaning the way you want to will involve taking risks and this will generate what look like mistakes. However, when things appear to go 'wrong' it is often because it takes a while to gain control over fresh techniques and to incorporate these into already better established procedures.

Unfortunately, reducing language learning to levels of attainment and relating these to ages and stages of educational experience may well limit the expectations of teachers. For example, statements like these can be found in the National Curriculum document for English with respect to writing;

* (Level 2) Structure sequences...coherently
* (Level 3) Use a range of sentence connectives - 'and', 'but', 'when', 'after'
* (Level 4) Use grammatical structures different from those characteristic of speech - 'because'

(NCC, 1989)

These requirements may well inhibit the possibility of looking at texts which work well without these connective devices, as shown here in the work of Andrew and William.

This kind of surface coherence analysis has been used to quantitatively describe differences between children's texts that qualitatively differ in holistic ratings (Scardemalia, Bereiter and Goelman, 1982). This positive finding implies that readers do respond appropriately to this aspect of texts. However, because connectives are easy to identify at surface level and for this reason appear in statutory statements of attainment (shown above) for children in schools in England and Wales (NCC, 1989), it must be stressed that other strategies can be used effectively by young writers in their efforts to take account of a reader during their progression towards becoming mature authors. Indeed, these children's texts illustrate the wealth of other strategies they use in their response to audience.

Teacher intervention will support these young writers best if it is informed by this deeper understanding of what it is that young writers can do. Any outcomes of discussion of profiling techniques and assessment procedures which are designed to capture development and show progress must reflect the wide range of strategies which are available to young writers. If these procedures assume that language learning, whether spoken or written, develops through discreet stages, then opportunities will be lost for helping teachers understand the recursive nature of language development and how this

understanding can guide their practice. In the coming years, efforts to support teachers as they come to embrace the implications of a national curriculum, will be critical. Continuing progress towards a holistic view of language development will rest in part on appropriate interpretations of National Curriculum Council documents supported by close attention to children's language behaviour at different ages and stages. Ways forward are still being discovered and continue to be rewarding.

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